DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 037 479 TE 500 599

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TITLE	ERIC Reports on the Junior College Survey: The Presidents' Questionnaire.
INSTITUTION	Modern Language Association of America, New York, N.Y. ERIC Clearinghouse on the Teaching of English in Higher Education.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	69
NOTE	5p.
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.35
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Attitudes, American English, Curriculum, English, English Curriculum, *English Instruction, English Programs, Instructional Staff, *Junior Colleges, Paraprofessional School Personnel, Presidents, *Questionnaires, *Reports, Research, Salaries, Teacher Education, Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT

The preliminary report of a joint study of the teaching of English at the junior college level, sponsored by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC), is based on 127 responses to a questionnaire sent to junior college presidents. The presidents accorded mixed reactions to questions concerning: (1) staff shortage, (2) teacher preparation, (3) teaching techniques related to increased academic efficiency, (4) curriculum priorities, and (5) teacher salaries. A second part of the questionnaire yielded information concerning a hypothetical National Task Force which would aim to service junior colleges by sending teams of specialists to work on specific teaching problems. Presidential attitudes toward financial support of such a program are also clarified. (RL)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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ED037479

ERIC Reports on the Junior College

Survey: The Presidents' Questionnaire

Compiled by John Scarry

During 1968-1969, the MLA in cooperation with the NCTE and the AAJC, sponsored a national survey of junior colleges, from the point of view of the teaching of English. The complete results will be published in the fall of 1970. One important source of information is the questionnaire sent to a sample of junior college presidents. A total of 127 responded, and their views form the basis of this report.

The presidents were first asked for their suggestions as to what "the Modern Language Association and the National Council of Teachers of English should do through its programs to be most helpful in meeting problems of instructor shortage and student needs during the next decade." The majority of the respondents either silently agreed with the premise that there is indeed a teacher shortage, or agreed and then commented on it, but a small group (15) indicated that they have no difficulty in recruiting teachers. One president, in Colorado, noted that he receives "several hundred unsolicited applications each year," and another reported that the applicants are "far in excess of needs." Two comments, both from New York City, indicate two points of view on this question--which is interesting when we consider the fact that both are in the same well-defined area. One of these presidents observed that "up to this time" he has had no difficulty in recruiting, "but this may become a problem in the next decade." The other stated flatly: "I am not aware that there is an instructor shortage or that there is likely to be in the next decade."

These who are aware of the problem--and they are the majority--offer a number of suggestions to improve the recruitment process. One president observed that "too little" is being done "to recruit...from the graduate

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schools." He suggests "a strong program of scholarships and loans to junior college graduates for upper-level undergraduate study in English; fellowships and loans for graduate study for those who will make a commitment to teaching in the junior college for a specified time..." Another suggests that we "examine universities' graduate programs to see if there are not some programs which are better suited for training community college English teachers." This is a common reaction; many of the responses allude to the unsatisfactory training provided by the graduate schools. The consensus is that "student needs are closely related to the shortage of qualified and knowledgeable instructors." The call is for "generalists" who know how to teach "communication skills"--"too much emphasis has been and still is on literature." One root of this problem is the fact that few want to teach composition: "Attempt to develop pride in teaching composition to freshmen. At the present time the typical instructor is dreaming of the time when he can teach literature courses." It would seem that even if the accepted composition course is taught with any degree of enthusiasm, the major problem is still not being faced--"remedial reading"; "the teaching of writing"; and "communication skills" in general are needed, not "the traditional belle lettre view of English" which is "not too useful in a public community college."

The presidents see the problem as one of "priorities." Unfortunately for them, they report, the universities and graduate schools do not provide teachers for the special needs of the community colleges. The general feeling is that the junior colleges themselves must provide this special training to solve these problems: "professional associations should hold workshops and in-service programs devoted to linguistics and the psychology of learning"; "prepare instructors who have strong backgrounds in linguistics, rhetoric, and the nature of learning in the communicative arts"; "audio-visual

aids"; "audio-tutorial labs"; "multi-media approach in teaching." In addition, some indicate that there is a definite need for "a regular publication of studies of methods and materials" which would provide information about current research on the teaching of English.

The presidents believe that smaller classes and lighter teaching loads are not the answer. "Stop compounding the problem," one respondent demanded, "by pushing for reduced teaching loads, fewer students and increased salaries." Another agrees, and adds: "There is no available evidence that shows that... small classes...really leads to more effective teaching of English." Another report on this aspect of the problem is more specific: "I get consistent pressure from our faculty members to hold the number of enrollees in our classes to 20," a president notes, "and yet the results of our teaching indicate that the rate of failure and withdrawal in this division is just as high as in those areas where enrollments of 30 to 40 are maintained." Perhaps budgetary limitations and related staffing problems are factors in these comments, but there is a general sense that fewer students in each class is not the answer to the problem of increased academic efficiency.

If the presidents feel that the universities and graduate schools have failed to provide effective teachers, some of their responses indicate that the elementary and secondary schools are producing woefully inadequate students. The junior colleges see themselves as being in the middle; they look above and below, and conclude that unprepared teachers are struggling with poorly taught students. "Something drastic should be done at the grade levels" is a recurring theme, and this problem is closely connected with that of the poorly trained teacher. It is at this point, more than any other, that student needs and teacher needs come together. In the face of this enormous problem, which must be solved by new and radical approaches, everyone in the junior college situation becomes a student. "Develop

willingness on the part of teacher training institutions to train teachers of remedial reading" is a suggestion that brings the twin problems into focus. Teachers and students could work out new techniques in the reading and writing labs, the regional workshops, and in the experience of team teaching.

The emphasis throughout these comments is on a radical change in the approach to the entire junior college teaching situation. The tenor of the responses indicates that, while the universities must adjust part of their programs to meet the needs of those who plan to teach on the junior college level, and while "something drastic" must be done at the lower levels, to produce at least literate students the basic solution--the actual application of new techniques--must take place in the junior college environment. There is agreement on the problems, a useful range of proposals for solutions, and--most encouraging of all--an enthusiasm for the implementation of new programs to improve the situation. Behind all of this there is the awareness that these changes must be radical ones, and they must be made soon. As one president pointed out (to quote him only slightly out of context), the junior colleges must work towards the improvement of their programs so that "English is not a hurdle but a bridge."

The second part of the questionnaire asked if the presidents would support "with money for services rendered" a "National Task Force operation sponsored by the MLA, NCTE, and AAJC" which would bring to "a junior college or to the English staffs of a group of junior colleges in an area, a small team of specialists (two or three) to work with young instructors, teaching associates, paraprofessionals, etc., on special problems such as the writing program, the program for the disadvantaged freshman, or the inner-city program." These specialists would be from junior college English departments and from the graduate schools.

A significant number (37) endorsed this idea without any mention of budgetary problems; 31 of the respondents indicated that this was indeed a good idea, but their funds are limited; 14 stated that they either needed further clarification of the program, or that their budgets were limited; 13 stated flatly that they were not able to support the program because of lack of funds; and only 6 announced that they do not consider the program to be desirable.

In addition to these initial responses, many of the presidents added comments on the proposal. Some of these reveal an attitude of caution: "Our experience in the past has shown us that visiting specialists from other junior colleges are not as aware of our local situation as are our own people, and we feel that any money spent for services in this area should be given to local people..." Others, while they accept the proposal, are wary for different reasons: "most of us have been pretty disappointed with itinerant 'specialists'"; "I would want to examine the credentials and credibility of the consultants rather closely." One irate president placed a firm condition on his agreement: "Not if you continue to involve the MLA in politics! (otherwise, yes.)"

The idea of a national task force was modified by a suggestion from one president who "would rather suggest regional institutes which brought together community college teachers to study the resources and problems of that geographical area." This emphasis upon local control is also reflected in this observation by a president who would agree to the program, "if we could choose the consultants and see their schedule ahead of time."

In general, the proposal met with a very favorable response, and if we exclude those who rejected it with qualification, the only problem is money. The majority of the presidents see the task force as a necessary and welcome part of their efforts towards renewal--and as an important factor in implementing reforms.